

By Norm Ornstein

First, a word about Sen. Warren B. Rudman.

In 1985, when Gramm-Rudman-Hollings was enacted as a way to bring fiscal balance, I was quoted in a U.S. News & World Report story expressing skepticism about its impact; I suggested that the automatic across-the-board budget cuts it mandated in the case of failure to reach deficit reduction benchmarks would be sidestepped by resourceful lawmakers, making it a less-successful device than its creators hoped.

A couple of days later, I got a call from Rudman, a New Hampshire Republican. Directly, not through a staffer. I didn't know him at all, and he was, shall we say, candid in his criticism of my comment and assertive in his defense of GRH. Although there was a nice ego boost in being called by a U.S. senator, it was not entirely a pleasant experience.

But it was quintessential Warren Rudman: passionate, direct, blunt, smart, honest. Later on, during his Senate career and afterward, I became friends with him, and I saw those qualities even more frequently.

Rudman was a force of nature, and whether he was fighting for fiscal probity or, with Gary Hart, warning presciently about the threat of terrorist attacks and calling for a new approach to homeland security, he offered clarion calls for sensible approaches to solving big problems.

Rudman was frequently referred to as a moderate, and in some respects he was. But he was basically an old-school conservative of the flinty Yankee (alright, Jewish Yankee) variety. To those of us who yearn for problem-solving to supplant rigid ideology and rampant tribalism, he was a sterling role model of the best in politics.

Rudman also was a campaign finance reformer. He was appalled by what was happening to the campaign finance system, long before McCain-Feingold was enacted and before Citizens

United and its progeny scarred the landscape.

Were he still with us, I have no doubt he would be active on the campaign finance front, seeking a better way, even in the face of a Supreme Court that may yet go even further to demolish all restraints.

Tilting the Balance

What to do? Disclosure, of course, is one key step, especially since it has received full-throated support from the Supreme Court.

I wish we could tighten disclosure rules, but even if we did, it would be only a small step toward health in the system. A bigger step would come from finding a way to empower small donors, who could under the right circumstances provide some balance against the overwhelming force of megadonors.

A couple of years ago, I joined scholars Michael Malbin, Tom Mann and Tony Corrado in devising a better and more comprehensive way to magnify the role of small donors while also empowering parties and making it easier, in the right way, for them to aid their own candidates.

Our report, "Reform in an Age of Networked Campaigns," has served as a template of sorts for a bill introduced by Rep. David E. Price, D-N.C., and backed by Chris Van Hollen, D-Md. (Rep. Walter B. Jones of North Carolina is the sole Republican co-sponsor.)

Price, among other things, gave us the "stand by your ad" provision in McCain-Feingold, which has helped to temper the viciousness of candidate-funded ads.

Van Hollen has been the driver behind legislation that would require a disclosure report to be filed with the Federal Election Commission within 24 hours of any spending, and the filing of a new report every time another \$10,000 or more is spent.

Van Hollen also has been the most tenacious prod to try to make the Federal Election Commission follow the intent and letter of the law with its regulations.

Price's legislation would provide a 5-to-1 matching fund for the first \$250 of contributions by individuals to presidential candidates and the first \$250 of contributions by individuals to House and Senate candidates.

Candidates who participate in the system would have to pass a threshold by raising a base amount of such contributions and would be limited to individual contributions of half that of non-participants, or \$1,250 at present. Parties could give unlimited funds to their candidates — provided the money they give to the candidates comes from a pool of contributions limited to \$1,250 per donor per year. And candidates who bought into the system would have no spending limits on their campaigns, although there would be a limit on how much could come from the Treasury to fund the matches.

Let's be honest: Enacting something like the Empowering Citizens Act would not magically transform our campaign finance world. But it would be a giant step toward tilting the balance in the direction of a more honest system and a more reasonable playing field.

I hope lawmakers of both parties, who have been alarmed, or at least made uneasy, by the 2012 campaign would take a careful look at it, and see it as a very positive and constructive step to make the broken system work better.